

An Eighteenth-Century Account of *Sati*: John Zephaniah Holwell's 'The Religious Tenets of the Gentoos' and 'Voluntary Sacrifice' (1767).

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Abstract

Writing in the period 1765–1779, John Zephaniah Holwell, temporary governor of Bengal (1760), was one of the first British writers to attempt a scholarly engagement with Hinduism. Despite being an important source for several Enlightenment writers, his work has been misrepresented by current scholarship. In particular his account of ‘voluntary sacrifice’, or *sati*, has been misunderstood as an example of eighteenth-century rationalism. This article will correct this by situating the account in a much fuller appreciation of Holwell’s ‘project’, which can be broadly understood as an attempt to reconcile his own heterodox Christianity with what he termed ‘*Gentoo*’ doctrines. It will show how Holwell’s insistence on the essential truth of ‘metempsychosis’ reveals an account of *sati* that is far more invested in presenting a particular reading of Indian religious principles than has hitherto been appreciated. This analysis challenges certain assumptions in the historiography of eighteenth-century European encounters with India, with a particular emphasis on intellectual culture.

Introduction

John Zephaniah Holwell (1711–1798), for a time governor of the British East India Company in Bengal (1760), was one of the first of a string of ‘Company men’ to publish work on Indian religions. His discussion of what he termed ‘the religion of the *Gentoos*’ appeared in a three-volume work, *Interesting Historical Events* (1765, 1767, 1771). Described by Edmund Burke as having provided the best account ‘of the religion of the *Gentoos* both in its original simplicity and in its present corruption’, Holwell was instrumental in presenting to European audiences the idea of a unified and ancient religious doctrine, native to India.¹ Both the first and second volumes were translated into French in 1768, and received with enthusiasm by the likes of Voltaire.² At a time when little was known about the religious landscape of India, Holwell captured the collective imagination. Heavily biased towards Brahminical authority, he presented a dualistic tradition that distinguished between ‘high’ pure religious concepts and ‘low’ ritualistic practices. Emphasising their ancient origins, Holwell described the original tenets of the Brahmins as ‘short, pure, simple and uniform’.³ They were, in other words, the most profound example of primitive religious truth, even though contemporary proponents had raised an idolatrous superstructure upon them.⁴

Holwell’s life and career in the Company was varied. He was educated in both England and Rotterdam, and began his Company career as a ship’s surgeon. In 1740 he settled at the hospital in Calcutta and in 1746 he became the principal physician and surgeon to the presidency. By that time he could read Persian well and had a good grasp of Bengali, paving the way for him to join the upper echelons of the Company’s bureaucracy.⁵ During a brief stay in London (1757) he persuaded the Board of Directors to appoint him *zamindar* (responsible for revenue collection, as well as law and order) in Calcutta, with a mandate to reform the role. But in June 1756, disaster struck when the nawab of Bengal, Siraj ud-Daula, attacked Fort William, ‘the Company’s base in Calcutta’, which was abandoned by Holwell’s superiors. Thus began his journey to literary notoriety. Bitter at the humiliations he had suffered during the course of this defeat, Holwell set about vindicating his actions and denouncing those of his rivals by publishing an account of the fort’s capture.⁶ His *Genuine Narrative of the Deplorable Deaths of the English Gentlemen and Others* was widely read and became an important fixture

¹ Edmund Burke, “Review of Holwell: Interesting historical events relative to the provinces of Bengal, and the empire of Indostan. Part II.” *Annual Register, or a view of the History, Politics, and Literature for the Year 1766* (1767): 306–19.

² Kate Marsh, *India in the French Imagination: Peripheral Voices, 1754–1815* (Oxford: Taylor Francis Pickering and Chatto, 2009), pp. 117–8.

³ J.Z. Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events, Relative to the Provinces of Bengal, and the Empire of Indostan*, Vol. 2 (London: T. Becket & P.A. de Hondt, 1767), p. 1.

⁴ J.Z. Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events, Relative to the Provinces of Bengal, and the Empire of Indostan*, Vol. 3 (London: T. Becket & P.A. de Hondt, 1771), p. 4.

⁵ D.L. Prior, ‘Holwell, John Zephaniah (1711–1798)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13622>, accessed 15 May 2016].

⁶ John Zephaniah Holwell, *Genuine Narrative of the Deplorable Deaths of the English Gentlemen and Others who were Suffocated in the Black Hole* (A. Millar, London, 1756). printed for A. Millar

in the colonial imagination.⁷ Rising and then falling out of favour in the Company, Holwell eventually returned to England in 1761, and set about publishing *Interesting Historical Events*. He also drew some acclaim for his essay on smallpox inoculation, which saw him admitted to the Royal Society in 1767.⁸

Despite his contemporary resonance, Holwell's work is difficult to find in the historical literature, aside from passing references. This can be ascribed to a narrative in which the works of early writers like Holwell serve as stark unscholarly counterpoints to the later, more sophisticated, accomplishments of prominent Orientalists like Sir William Jones, and of other writers following the formation of the Asiatick Society of Bengal in 1784.⁹ This has been to the detriment of understanding an important stage in the development of these ideas and the corresponding period in the East India Company's history, when it shifted from being a mercantile enterprise to a sovereign entity. There are, however, a few moments in the historiography in which Holwell features more prominently. P.J. Marshall's *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* features a short excerpt from Holwell's essay 'The Religious Tenets of the *Gentoos*' as part of a collection of extracts by various Company officials on the topic of Hinduism. By its nature, Marshall's anthology precludes the opportunity for sustained discussion, save for a brief introduction to the contemporary landscape, but he does hint at the possibility of reading Holwell as a 'deist'.¹⁰ More recently, Holwell has featured as the subject of a chapter in Urs App's *The Birth of Orientalism*, in which he is accused of falsifying evidence in pursuit of an idiosyncratic 'Christian reformism'.¹¹ App's expansive work, in which Holwell is subordinated to a broader discourse involving seven additional case studies, offers limited space for a full appreciation of Holwell's ideas. Clearly Holwell's own religious motivations are important. Yet both of these readings tend to undermine the more complex interactions that occurred between Holwell's own beliefs and those that he encountered in India. This article proposes a close reading of a particular passage as a lens through which Holwell can be re-evaluated.

Featuring in Holwell's discussion of the '*Gentoo* religion' is an account of the funeral rites of a famed Hindu pandit 'of the *Mahahrattor* tribe' and the self-immolation of his teenage widow.¹² For Holwell, this 'voluntary sacrifice' was a striking example of 'heroic, as well as rational and pious principles'.¹³ The burning of wives on the funeral pyres of their deceased

⁷ Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁸ John Zephaniah Holwell, *An Account of the Manner of Inoculating for the Small Pox in the East Indies with...Observations on the...Mode of Treating that Disease in those Parts* (London: T. Becket & P.A. de Hondt, 1767).

⁹ See M.J. Franklin, '*Orientalist Jones*': *Sir William Jones, Poet, Lawyer, and Linguist, 1746–1794* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and P.J. Marshall, 'Introduction', in P.J. Marshall (ed.), *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 1–44.

¹⁰ Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 9.

¹¹ Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), pp. 297–362.

¹² Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 93.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

husbands, widely termed as either *sati* or ‘suttee’,¹⁴ was a topic of great fascination throughout the history of European encounters with India.¹⁵ Urging his readers to ‘view it (as we should every other action) without prejudice’, Holwell’s account has been taken up by a number of scholars as an example of a more sympathetic interest in *sati* characteristic of developing attitudes in the eighteenth century.¹⁶ This phase of European encounters with the practice is regarded as distinct from a more homogenised nineteenth-century discourse which tended to express a sense of moral outrage at what was cast as a relic of degenerate superstition.¹⁷ Consequently scholars have sought to align the eighteenth century with the more cosmopolitan attitudes of Enlightenment values. Andrea Major, for example, uses administrative writing and journalistic discourses to suggest that eighteenth-century writing on the practice was characterised by the spirit of rational inquiry; she sees Holwell’s refusal to judge the custom as tantamount to a kind of cultural relativism.¹⁸ On a similar note, Norbert Schürer presents Holwell’s account as emblematic of a rationalist trend, describing it as ‘philosophically indebted’ to Adam Smith. Designating Holwell a perfect example of Smith’s ‘Impartial Spectator’, he suggests Holwell is left to ‘assess the widow’s action according to rational, impartial criteria’.¹⁹ This kind of ‘sympathetic reasoning’ is seen by Schürer as a system whereby ‘the observer recognizes that his own biases can easily lead to a condemnation of different practices—and therefore does not primarily pass judgment’.²⁰

While Holwell certainly presents himself as a detached observer, such an interpretation takes the rhetoric of the observer too much at face value. Holwell’s account of *sati* is in fact heavily saturated by an entirely different agenda, formulated on highly-invested religious and philosophical idiosyncrasies. In the final volume of *Interesting Historical Events*, Holwell leads his readers to the conclusion that the original tenets of the Gentoos ‘are the only primitive truths necessary to man’s salvation’.²¹ This last volume departed in style from the previous two and essentially was a polemical account of the coherence and continuity between ancient Gentoo and early Christian beliefs. Central to this was Holwell’s belief that the Gentoo doctrine of metempsychosis, or what would commonly be recognised now as reincarnation, was convincing proof of a heterodox belief in ‘the rebellion, the expulsion and the punishment of

¹⁴ ‘Suttee’ is the anglicisation of *sati* and both words may refer to the ritual itself, or to the woman who undergoes it. I use the term *sati* rather than suttee, as is common among scholarship on the topic.

¹⁵ Andrea Major offers a comprehensive study of the character of these encounters in Andrea Major, *Pious Flames, European Encounters with Sati (1500–1830)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 97.

¹⁷ See for example the descriptions of the ‘great atrocity’ in ‘East India Affairs. Hindoo Widows Immolated since July the 5th, 1825. Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, 17th May, 1827’, in *The London Magazine*, Vol. 19 (December 1827), pp. 541–52. For secondary literature, see Jana Tschurenne, ‘Between Non-Interference in Matters of Religion and the Civilizing Mission: The Prohibition of Suttee in 1829’, in Harald Fischer-Tiné and Michael Mann (eds), *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), pp. 50–68.

¹⁸ Major, *Pious Flames*, p. 93.

¹⁹ Norbert Schürer, ‘The Impartial Spectator of Satī, 1757–84’, in *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 42, no. 1 (2008), p. 23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 3, p. 72. Holwell refers to him as ‘John Ilive’ by mistake.

the apostate angels' on earth. That is, Holwell argued that this Gentoo doctrine supported his already-confessed belief in the proclamations of the self-styled prophet of eighteenth-century London, Jacob Ilive, that this world and the souls that inhabit it were angelic beings who were being punished for a pre-existing lapse.²² By taking Holwell's eyewitness account of *sati* out of this context and simply abstracting it in support of a broad thesis on the nature of eighteenth-century writings on India, scholars have completely misrepresented its intended meaning. What follows here is a detailed exploration of that meaning, according to Holwell's entire project.

Although Holwell claimed to have witnessed an act of 'voluntary sacrifice' in 1742, the publication of his account did not come for another two decades. It first appeared as a short extract in *The London Magazine* of December 1766, promoting the forthcoming publication of the full account in the second volume of *Interesting Historical Events*. Within the book's text it formed part of a much broader discussion on the 'mythology and cosmogony, fasts and festivals of the Gentoos, followers of the Shastah'.²³ As a British writer directly engaging with the topic of Indian religion, Holwell's representations of *sati* were thus made in the cause of advancing a particular interpretation of what the Gentoo religion was. It is in its defence that Holwell introduced the topic of *sati*, and yet it is an appreciation of his own particular interpretation of Indian religion that is entirely missing from the literature that has cited him as an example of eighteenth-century attitudes.

The Doctrine of Metempsychosis

Holwell's own perception of his project was that he was rescuing the Gentoos' religion from being misunderstood. The introduction to his three-volume study begins with criticism directed at 'authors in almost all ages', whose accounts he described as 'fallacious, and unsatisfactory to an inquisitive searcher after truth'.²⁴ Yet what Holwell described as the 'truth' may well have been the result of creative misrepresentation. In particular, although Holwell claimed to have discovered the 'Gentoo Bible' or '*Shastah*', the manuscript itself was conveniently lost before his return to England.²⁵ Nor was this the first of his forays into artistic licence: in his infamous account of the ordeal endured by those imprisoned in the 'Black Hole' when Fort William was captured in 1757, he cast himself as a stoic hero in this terrible tragedy.²⁶ Holwell's account has since been interpreted by Partha Chatterjee as a pedagogical tract aimed at pointing out how the behaviour of the European troops fell short of their assumed superiority.²⁷ This is also the case for the supposed *Shastah*: according to Holwell, the narrative of moral purity and decline that surrounded his explanation of the lost truths of the original *Shastah* had universal ramifications. Establishing a binary between 'high' original and 'low'

²² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

²³ Title page to J.Z. Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events, Relative to the Provinces of Bengal, and the Empire of Indostan*, Vol. 1 (London: T. Becket & P.A. de Hondt, 1765).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

²⁶ For Holwell's retelling to his advantage, see Kate Brittlebank (ed.), *Tall Tales and True: India Historiography and British Imperial Imaginings* (Clayton: Monash University Press, 2008), pp. 9–12.

²⁷ Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire*, pp. 25–6.

corrupted religious concepts, Holwell introduced his discovery by specifying that ‘we should touch only on the original *principal* tenets of these ancient people the *Gentoos*; for were we to penetrate into, and discuss the whole of their modern ceremonials and complicated modes of worship; our labour would be without end’.²⁸ This was meant not just as a critique of contemporary Gentoo religious practices; it was also an account of a universal trend which had obscured the original and untainted religion. Holwell explained that ‘in this predicament the *Gentoos* are not singular, as the original text of every theological system has, we presume from a similar cause, unhappily undergone the same fate’.²⁹ It was this that recommended Holwell’s particular interpretation of Indian religion to the attention of commentators like Voltaire, whose criticism of the Catholic Church’s extravagance was aided by Holwell’s ‘discovery’ of foreign ancient religious tenets that were, by contrast, ‘short, pure, simple and uniform’ according to the same principles as primitive Christianity.³⁰

According to Holwell, in the case of the *Gentoos* the ‘cause’ of decline appeared to be a mixture of popular ignorance and priestly intervention. The text Holwell claimed to be relaying to his readers was the *Chatah Bhade Shastah of Bramah*, which was delivered from God to the people by the ‘lawgiver’ Brahma.³¹ In addition to this original *Shastah*, Holwell detailed three later scriptures which had come to obscure the original as the Brahmins began to ‘veil in mysteries, the simple doctrines of the Bramah’:³² the first, the *Chatah Bhade of Bramah*, was composed one thousand years after the original *Shastah* as a commentary; the next, the *Aughtorrah Bhade Shastah*, followed ‘three hundred and sixty-six years past’ and ‘swelled the Gentoo scriptures to eighteen books’ through the addition of various histories and rites. According to Holwell it was the cause of ‘the first and only schism among the *Gentoos*, that subsists to this day’.³³ In turn the *Aughtorrah Bhade Shastah* had inspired the most allegorical and complicated set of innovations, composed ‘by the *Gentoos* of *Mallabar* and *Cormandel* (*sic*) coasts: and also of the Island of Ceylon’, titled the *Viedam of Brummah*.³⁴ This last text caused a geographical split between the northern followers of the *Aughtorrah Bhade Shastah* and those following the *Viedam* in the south. According to Holwell, most accounts of the Gentoo religion were based on encounters with the followers of either of these much elaborated texts, leaving him unsurprised that ‘the religion of the *Gentoos* has been traduced, by some, as utterly unintelligible’.³⁵ It is on this basis that he set out to rescue the *Gentoos* from being misunderstood through an exploration of the original *Shastah*.

Holwell’s inventive mixture of the terms ‘Bhade’ (Vedas), ‘Shastah’ (Shastra), and ‘Viedam’ (Vedas, again) presents a confusing picture. App has suggested that these errors were due to the sources he used, most of which were European. And yet one of Holwell’s most used

²⁸ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ For an example of Voltaire making direct use of Holwell’s work, see *Fragments sur quelques revolutions dans l’Inde* (1774), p. 228.

³¹ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, pp. 11–12.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12. Please check if this is Vol. 1 or 2

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

sources, Abraham Roger's *A Door Open'd to Knowledge of Occult Pagansim* (1651), which could have been read by Holwell in either the Dutch original or the English translation, and which appeared in Picart's popular *Religious Ceremonies and Customs of All the Peoples of the World* (1723–43), does not make this same 'error'.³⁶ Roger, along with most other European sources on Indian religion, cites the Vedas, or the 'Vedam', as the most important Indian religious scripture. At the same time as the publication of Holwell's account, French writers were consumed by a dispute about the supposed discovery of a lost Veda in the form of the 'Ezourvedam'.³⁷ Roger made a clear distinction between the Vedas and the literature of the commentaries that they generated, which he named 'Iastra' (Shastra).³⁸ Rather than being confused, Holwell appears to have taken a deliberately different path in a bid to claim original insight. Much of what was known about the Vedas was a result of Catholic, mainly Jesuit, research, something Holwell was keen to distance himself from at the beginning of his project, denouncing the previous productions of 'Popish authors' as untrustworthy.³⁹ This implied link between unsatisfactory catholic scholarship and the misapplication of authority to the Vedas is made all the more clear when we look at the geographical relegation of Holwell's *Viedam* to the southern areas of India, roughly aligned with the Portuguese and French missions. This would marry with contemporary Company politics, as well as Holwell's personal distaste. Paranoia about the French reached an extreme in the late 1750s to early 1760s when, following the loss and recapture of Calcutta, of which Holwell was an important part, the Board of Directors agreed it would be 'a prudent measure so long as the French war subsists not to suffer any person professing the Roman Catholic religion, priests or others' at Fort William.⁴⁰ By associating the 'insignificant literal translations of the *Viedam*', the most modern of the scriptures, with the 'superstitious zeal' of its distrusted 'Romish' interpreters, Holwell set the scene for his 'pure' interpretation of a completely different and 'original' doctrine untouched by the priestcraft of either religion.⁴¹

Considering the above, it becomes clear that the section in which Holwell offered his account of *sati*, though not remarkably lengthy, came at a crucial point in his work. It forms the conclusion to Chapter Four, 'The Religious Tenets of the Gentoos followers of the Shastah of Brahma', (vol.2) in which 'in which Holwell laid out his claims to unique authority'.⁴² In effect, Holwell's discussion of *sati* summarised his construction of Gentoo religion and its great antiquity in order to put forward a particular interpretation. Looking at the structure of his book, we can also see how his account of 'voluntary sacrifice' fitted within the entirety of the three volume project, the full title of which was *Interesting Historical Events, Relative to the*

³⁶ Will Sweetman, *Mapping Hinduism: 'Hinduism' and the Study of Indian Religions, 1600–1776* (Halle: Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftungen zu Halle, 2003), p. 90.

³⁷ See Ludo Rocher, (ed.) "Introduction", *Ezourvedam: A French Veda of the Eighteenth Century* (University of Pennsylvania Studies on South Asia, vol.1. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1984)

³⁸ App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, p. 330.

³⁹ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 1, p. 6.

⁴⁰ S. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India 1707–1758* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 490.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 100.

Provinces of Bengal, and the Empire of Indostan. With a seasonable hint and perswasive (sic) to the Honourable The Court of Directors of the East India Company as also The Mythology and Cosmogony, Facts and Festivals of the Gentoo's (sic), Followers of the Shastah. And A Dissertation on the Metempsychosis, commonly, though erroneously, called the Pythagorean Doctrine. The 'Doctrine of Metempsychosis' is the most central feature of Holwell's work. Despite not appearing until the third volume, published in 1771, its inclusion in the full title in 1765 demonstrates Holwell's intention to produce a dissertation on metempsychosis from the outset. While his conclusions about the implications of this 'doctrine' for a European religious landscape were not elaborated until the final volume, Holwell had earlier written much about its significance.

Metempsychosis, a term taken from Greek philosophy, refers to the movement of the soul between bodies after physical death. In most European sources, the metempsychosis expressed in Eastern religions was relegated to the realm of mystic irrationalism, whereas discussions of 'transmigration' as expressed in classical philosophy were designated as ancient allegories for the principles of natural philosophy. In one of Holwell's sources, Bulstrode Whitelocke's *Essay of Transmigration, in Defence of Pythagoras: Or, a Discourse of Natural Philosophy* (1692), for example, an Aristotelian distinction between the Rational Soul and the Sensitive (or Vegetative) Spirit allowed its author to conclude that Pythagoras was simply referring to the redistribution of the Sensitive Spirit into other material forms after the death of the body.⁴³ This was echoed in John Toland's rationalist vindication of Pythagoras who, according to this account, 'did not believe the Transmigration which has made [him] so famous to Posterity', since 'he meant no more than the eternal Revolution of all Forms in Matter'.⁴⁴ So when Holwell stated that 'Pythagoras took the doctrine of *Metempsychosis*, from the *Bramins*', he was entirely reversing this trope.⁴⁵ While most eighteenth-century commentators inferred that Indian ideas about reincarnation were derived from Classical concepts, Holwell attempted to convince his readers that the opposite was true. According to him, these original ideas, spread by both Pythagoras and Zoroaster, 'truly bore the stamp of divine!'; in subsequent years, however, the adaptation of these theories to diverse religious interests and innovations had resulted in them becoming 'wild and incomprehensible!'.⁴⁶ The spread and eventual obscurity of the doctrine of metempsychosis outside India thus featured as a parallel narrative to the decline of the Gentoo religion. Just as the simplicity of the *Shastah* was gradually corrupted, the essential truth of metempsychosis, once known to humanity, was eventually lost due to the priestcraft of the 'Persian and *Egyptian Magi*'.⁴⁷

For Holwell, the doctrine of metempsychosis contained within the *Shastah* was an important discovery that pertained to the origins of most theological systems. Holwell thus

⁴³ Bulstrode Whitelocke, *Essay of Transmigration, in Defence of Pythagoras: Or, a Discourse of Natural Philosophy* (London: printed by E.H. for Tho. Basset, 1692), p. 79.

⁴⁴ John Toland, 'The History of the Soul's Immortality among the Heathens', *Letters to Serena* (London: printed for Bernard Lintot, 1704; Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1965), p. 57.

⁴⁵ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 26.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

presented to his readers the original creation story, a translation which he claimed took him ‘eighteen months hard labour’ despite it not being clear from which language he was translating.⁴⁸ Holwell had mastered Persian, but made no claims to understand Sanskrit. As a result, the following narrative appears very much to be his own invention based on snippets of information about the Gentoo religion, as well as European sources and religious polemics. In it, Holwell described how Earth was in fact created as the mid planet of fifteen planets, or *Boboons*, designed to gradually punish and then purify the souls of delinquent angels (*debtah*) who had been expelled from Heaven following a rebellion.⁴⁹ More could be said about the Holwell’s construction of his story here, but it suffices to say that this idea, the Doctrine of Metempsychosis, was the absolute crux of his work. It was the essential truth that humanity was in fact the spirits of delinquent angels, whose duty was to purify themselves through a virtuous life (Holwell strongly recommended vegetarianism as an aid to this journey) and return to their heavenly abode.

Holwell’s religion of the Gentoos, derived from the *Shastah*, hinged on a complex interplay of personal conviction, Christian heterodox pamphlet literature and some insight into Indian beliefs. App has suggested that we can dismiss Holwell’s *Shastah* as a complete forgery that was principally derived from other European sources and motivated by a belief in the prophecies of Jacob Ilive.⁵⁰ But while it is clear that Holwell did not possess the skills to translate an ancient and little known set of scriptures, it seems unlikely that a man who had spent almost thirty years in India between 1732 and 1761, did not make any direct enquiries into the beliefs of the Brahmins he so admired.⁵¹ Moreover, he was capable of reading Persian, which was the language of most source material for Europeans enquiring into Indian religious beliefs in this period.⁵² There are several similarities between Holwell’s elaborated creation story in the *Shastah* and some Hindu traditions, to the extent that Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty has suggested that Christian versions of similar mythologies were very easily fused with or accommodated into later Hindu beliefs about ‘the Fall’.⁵³ It is, therefore, possible that Holwell’s perceived alignment of certain Gentoo practices with his own beliefs convinced him of the *Shastah*’s original truth, for example the way in which the doctrine of *ahisma*, or non-violence to all living things, appealed to emerging ideas about vegetarianism in the eighteenth century.⁵⁴ Holwell, who strongly criticised the detrimental effects of a diet containing meat for both body and soul, saw *ahimsa* as evidence of the original truth of Gentoo ideas.⁵⁵ Rather than seeing Holwell’s interpretation of the *Shastah* as merely a vehicle for a narrow reformist

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 53–70.

⁵⁰ App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, p. 362.

⁵¹ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 3, p. 72.

⁵² ‘Hindusim, History of Scholarship’, in Denise Cush, Catherine Robinson and Michael York (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Hinduism* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), p. 330.

⁵³ Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1976).

⁵⁴ Tristram Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution: Radical Vegetarianism and the Discovery of India* (London: Harper Press, 2006).

⁵⁵ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 3., p. 161.

agenda, it is more likely that his treatise was a network of interconnecting ideas and sources, both Indian and European.

While aligning these discoveries with the similar essential truths in Christianity became the focus of Holwell's most contentious and much later final volume of 1771, the important ramifications of this idea were already apparent in his earlier work in which the account of *sati* appeared. For Holwell, the doctrine of metempsychosis had the advantage of solving several troublesome theological problems, such as the not insignificant matter of theodicy: the idea that earthly punishments were the just consequences of a pre-existent lapse solved the seemingly contradictory ideas of a benevolent God and the admission of moral evil into the world. Holwell acknowledged that he had 'hitherto met with no solution of this interesting enquiry, so satisfactory, conclusive, and rational, as follows from the doctrine before us'.⁵⁶ When he described the original texts of the ancient Brahmins as the oldest and most original religious texts, it was this essential doctrine that he saw as their most significant contribution. Appearing in the middle of this discussion, and directly following Holwell's suggestion that Pythagoras's ideas were derived from Gentoo metempsychosis, Holwell's account of *sati* must be read in this context.

Holwell as Witness

Holwell claimed to have been present at several instances of *sati*. The example he decided to describe in detail concerned the self-immolation of a seventeen-year-old widow, the mother of three young children. This, he was at pains to point out, was an example of the 'fiery-trail' that was willingly entered into by the participant. The widow was not even persuaded by the pleas of Lady Russell, wife of the chief factor of the province; Holwell regarded her resolve as a 'most remarkable proof of female fortitude and constancy'.⁵⁷ He wrote:

'...she with a resolved and calm countenance, put her finger into the fire, and held it there a considerable time, she then with one hand put fire in the palm of the other, sprinkled incense on it, and fumigated the *Bramins*...all the *Bramins* fell at her feet;-after she had blessed them, they retired weeping;- by two steps, she ascending into the pile and entered the arbor; on her entrance, she made a profound reverence at the feet of the deceased, and advanced and seated herself by his head; she looked, in silent meditation on his face, for the space of a minute, then set fire to the arbor, in *three places*; observing that she had set fire to leeward and that the flames blew from her, instantly seeing her error she rose, and set fire to windward, and resumed her station.... With what dignity, and undaunted a countenance, she set fire to the pile the last time, and assumed her seat, can only be conceived, for words cannot convey a just idea of her'.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁵⁷ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 93.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 93–7.

In this description there are two important points of emphasis. The first is that the widow's sacrifice is voluntary, deliberate and considered, exemplified by her rational calculation in determining the direction of the flames. The second is that her demeanour is pious and calm; her 'profound reverence' and 'silent meditation' mark the event as sacred, to the extent that the Brahmins bow at her feet. These two details combine to furnish Howell's conclusion that 'if we view these women in a just light, we shall think more candidly of them, and confess that they act upon heroic, as well as rational and pious principles'.⁵⁹

This is a bold justification of a highly contentious religious rite. Only seven years earlier, the hugely popular *New History of the East-Indies*, the 1757 English translation of Claude-Marie Guyon's work, had offered 'an account of the cruellest of their superstitions', describing *sati* an 'abominable' as well as a 'barbaric' custom.⁶⁰ Thus from the beginning of his account Holwell was addressing prevailing misconceptions head on. He first dismissed the 'common mistake' that *sati* had arisen as a countermeasure to the poisoning of their husbands by Gentoo wives. He then contradicted 'received opinion' that a wife's refusal of *sati* would result in her disgrace as 'equally void of fact'.⁶¹ He finally called upon his European readers to suspend their prejudice by dispensing with their tendency to regard things through the lens of 'our own tenets and customs...to the injury of others'.⁶² It is this relativist quality that led Schürer to designate Holwell as 'a disinterested observer', an example of how eighteenth-century accounts assessed *sati* 'according to rational, impartial criteria', in the same manner as Smith's conceptual figure of the 'Impartial Spectator'.⁶³

When we come to re-examine Holwell's account in relation to the level of importance that he accorded to the doctrine of metempsychosis, however, this reading no longer stands up. When Holwell concludes his discussion of *sati* by describing these '*Gentoo* women' as 'females trained from their infancy, in the full conviction of their *celestial rank*', we are forced to see this not as a poetic aside to a description of religious conviction, but rather as a material point within the broader framework of Holwell's scheme. Holwell meant '*celestial rank*' in a very literal sense, that is in the pattern of transmigration of souls. The unusual serenity of the widow in the throes of the act was a result of her knowledge that 'this world, and the corporeal form that incloses them, is defined by God, the one as their place of punishment, the other as their prison'.⁶⁴ Thus when Holwell describes these women as 'raised to a soothing degree of dignity befitting angelic beings', he meant it in a sense so disarmingly literal that it has hitherto been overlooked.⁶⁵ For Holwell, the doctrine of metempsychosis, not impartial observation,

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁶⁰ Claude-Marie Guyon, *A New History of the East-Indies, Ancient and Modern*, Vol. 1 (London: R. and J. Dodsley, [1744] 1757), pp. 445, 447.

⁶¹ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 88.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁶³ Schürer, 'The Impartial Spectator of Satī, 1757–84', p. 24.

⁶⁴ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 98.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

was the basis for his assessment of ‘voluntary sacrifice’ as a striking example of ‘heroic as well as rational and pious principles’.⁶⁶

Metempsychosis and Voluntary Sacrifice

This information requires us to alter our reading of Holwell’s account; to re-examine the criteria for the ‘heroic’ and then the ‘rational and pious’ elements of the act according to his judgement. Holwell deliberately utilised heightened and emotive language to dramatise the ‘heroic’ element of the event. His ‘tears of commiseration, awe and reverence’, for example, followed some of the contemporaneous conventions of sentimentalism, which picked up on some of the patterns identified by Monika Fludernik’s exploration of the presence of Burkean aesthetics in late eighteenth-century accounts of *sati*.⁶⁷ Holwell’s rendition of *sati* as an ‘object of wonder’ conformed exactly to Burke’s aesthetic notion of ‘the sublime’, the essence of which was, according to Burke, the combination of awe and a sense of solemnity. Reflecting Burke’s categorisation of the sublime as ‘Beauty in distress’,⁶⁸ Holwell unsurprisingly regarded women of ‘an advanced age’ as ‘less an object of wonder’ than ‘women in the bloom of youth, and beauty’.⁶⁹ Burke’s conception of the sublime as a passion included notions of peril and pain; hence the suitability of *sati* as an example. According to Burke, whatever ‘operates in a manner analogous to terror’, and is capable of exciting the most extreme passion, ‘is the source of the *sublime*’. In this scenario, the threat of actual pain is qualified by a lack of proximity, since ‘when danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight’.⁷⁰ This ‘thrill’ of witnessing terror from a distance was a common feature of eighteenth-century accounts of *sati*, most of which focused on the emotional response of the viewer rather than the widow undergoing the extreme torment of burning alive. Fludernik stresses how, even in those accounts where a great deal of space was given to describing the rite, the pain of the *sati* was frequently displaced onto the viewer whose suffering at the sight of the scene took centre stage.⁷¹ In the case of Holwell, his ‘tears of commiseration, awe and reverence’ were the emotive climax of his account, and stood in stark contrast to the serenity of the widow.

The religious dimension of this heroism can be read as both a comment on the strength of belief among the Gentoo faithful in the doctrine of metempsychosis, and a critique of the corresponding lack of conviction of their European counterparts. This was not an uncommon way to use knowledge of other religious traditions in the Enlightenment’s ‘Republic of Letters’. Montesquieu’s widely-read *Persian Letters* (1721), for example, exploited the idea of a cross-cultural encounter to comment on Western politics from a fictionalised outside viewpoint by presenting the absurdities of the French court from the perspective of a Persian visitor. In Holwell’s account, the ‘heroic...rational and pious principles’ of the Gentoo women were cast

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁶⁷ Monika Fludernik, ‘Suttee Revisited: From the Iconography of Martyrdom to the Burkean Sublime’, in *New Literary History*, Vol. 30, no. 2 (Spring 1999), pp. 411–37.

⁶⁸ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, [1756] ed. Adam Philips, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.100.

⁶⁹ Howell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 91.

⁷⁰ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 36.

⁷¹ Fludernik, ‘Suttee Revisited’, p. 415.

as ‘diametrically contrary to the prevailing spirit’ of his ‘fair country-women’, who he regarded as more concerned with ‘captivating amusements’.⁷² In a pointed passage Holwell appealed to his female readers’ ‘natural goodness of heart, generosity and candour’, so that they might regard ‘their *Gentoo* sisters’, to whom he had already controversially assigned the moral high ground, in a more compassionate light and not dismiss *sati* as ‘an infatuation’.⁷³ Holwell here was offering a forceful rebuke to European assumptions of superiority. The satirical streak did not stop there, either. A comparison of *sati* to martyrdom served to raise *Gentoo* piety even higher; the ‘voluntary sacrifices by fire’ of British history, Holwell pointed out, came about merely because people refused to ‘subscribe even to a different mode of professing the same faith’.⁷⁴ Holwell’s point was thinly veiled: which was more ridiculous, voluntary sacrifice according to a consistent doctrine of transmigration, or death by fire as a result of fanatical sectarian conflict? Holwell’s view here was consistent with his summary of the Reformation in the third volume of *Interesting Historical Events* as ‘Spiritual pride, joined to temporal political maxims’.⁷⁵

Holwell’s assessment of the ‘rational and pious’ aspects of *sati* began with his account of the origins of the practice. He described the circumstances surrounding the funeral of ‘the *Gentoo*’s great Law-giver and Prophet Bramah’, the original author of the scriptures Holwell had found, as the first instance of *sati*. Brahma’s inconsolable wives apparently offered themselves as ‘voluntary victims on his funeral pile’; the wives of prominent figures ‘followed the heroic example’ because they feared they might appear to be lacking in affection.⁷⁶ Finally the Brahmins, who had been enshrined as the custodians of religious truth by Brahma himself, pronounced that by this act the women had elevated themselves in the cycle of reincarnation, or ‘*transmigrations*’, as Holwell put it.⁷⁷ Yet all of this seems discordant with Holwell’s ‘heroic, rational and pious principles’. The motives of the subsequent *satis* and the Brahmins were both cast as suspect. While the first *satis* were clearly influenced by the social pressure to appear sufficiently grief-stricken at the funeral of Brahma, Holwell tantalisingly left open the question of ‘whether the *Brahmins* were sincere in their declared sense, and consecration of this act, or had a view to secure the fidelity of their own wives’.⁷⁸ This process would in that case be a good example of the kind of innovation that Holwell railed against elsewhere; he described how such innovation was ‘foisted into the *Charatah* and *Augtorrah Bhades*...strained from some obscure passages’ from the original scriptures.⁷⁹

This raises the question of why Holwell chose to defend something that could easily have been dismissed like the many other ‘fasts and festivals’ he saw as belonging to the corrupt and superstitious practices of the more ‘vulgar’ *Gentoo*s; the answer lay in Holwell’s desire to show the centrality of his version of the doctrine of metempsychosis to the essence of the

⁷² Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 98.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 97–8.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁷⁵ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 3, p. 85.

⁷⁶ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 90.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

Gentoo religion. According to Holwell, after the Brahmins' wives began practising *sati*, '[t]he wives of every *Gentoo* caught the enthusiastic (now pious) flame'.⁸⁰ It is this distinction between 'enthusiastic' and pious' that is the crux of the issue. In the context of eighteenth-century religious discussion, such a division was crucial;⁸¹ the association of religious enthusiasm with irrationality and zealotry had become a commonplace polemic, particularly in response to Methodism's appearance in the middle of the eighteenth century.⁸² In 1708, the earl of Shaftesbury's publication, *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm*, had made the link explicit, and had played a central role in defining the differences between piety and extravagance of religious expression; the deciding factor was that while the former was consistent and compatible with reason, the latter was regarded as a form of irrationality.⁸³ In the final volume of *Interesting Historical Events*, in the 'Dissertation on Metempsychosis', Holwell saw enthusiasm as just short of blasphemy;⁸⁴ this was an important distinction for Holwell, whose work demonstrated wide reading and a strong familiarity with contemporary religious polemic.

The distinction between piety and enthusiasm very much rested on the inclusion of rationality; while the introduction of the custom of *sati* was enthusiastic, in its continuation the woman choosing to undertake it became pious. The rational element of *sati* hinged on its existence as a 'voluntary' act. Just as in his depiction of the events, in which Holwell described the calm and deliberate actions of the women, he was careful to render the decision itself a similarly systematic procedure. He stated it was a 'known fact' that the 'sacrifices must be voluntary'. He then described the process whereby the wife 'has it in her choice to burn', but 'is not permitted to declare her resolution before twenty-four hours after the decease of her husband'.⁸⁵ He added that once her decision was made, it could not be retracted. Holwell thus dispelled any illusion of *sati* as an enthusiastic momentary passion, instead depicting it as a formulaic and legalistic procedure.

Nevertheless Holwell had an odd appreciation of what constituted a 'voluntary' decision. He ended his description of *sati* with the information that, if the women refused, 'the worst consequence' would be that they would be 'under the imputation of being wanting to their own honor, purification and the prosperity of their family'.⁸⁶ Although admitting that 'from their infancy' women were taught to regard *sati* as a great honour, Holwell seemed not to consider this aspect of their 'choice to burn' as diminishing the overarching voluntary nature of the act. Again, this was a common feature of many accounts of *sati*. Even in those accounts that condemned it, the wishes and agency of the woman in question were subordinated to the

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁸¹ Michael Heyd, *Be Sober and Reasonable: The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, vol. 63. Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1995)

⁸² For the interchangeable use of 'enthusiasm' and 'Methodism', see Misty G. Anderson, *Imagining Methodism in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Enthusiasm, Belief and the Borders of the Self* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 37.

⁸³ Lawrence E. Klein, 'Introduction', in Anthony Ashley Cooper Earl of Shaftesbury (Lawrence E. Klein, ed.), *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. xvi.

⁸⁴ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 3, p. 144.

⁸⁵ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 88.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 88–9.

larger issues imposed on the event by the observer. For Holwell, what was at stake was the distinction between enthusiasm and piety, not female agency. That there was a legalistic process, in which the decision was officiated by the Brahmins according to a particular set of criteria, was enough to render it rational and pious rather than enthusiastic or an example of 'infatuation'. Because Holwell was a strong critic of 'ungovernable passions', this was enough.⁸⁷ His rather idiosyncratic conception of choice was thus captured, rather revealingly, by his oxymoronic phrase which described Brahma's wives as 'voluntary victims'.⁸⁸

Holwell's views carried over into the ways that he demonstrated the piety of the act. Reflecting a tradition in which the subjectivity of the widow was diminished, his account followed a similar pattern whereby the physical pain of burning to death was removed or rendered insignificant.⁸⁹ Holwell's account ended abruptly with the roof of the arbour collapsing on top of the seated woman, with no further reference to the suffering that would have followed.⁹⁰ Where he did refer to the suffering involved in *sati*, it was used as a point of comparison; those women who experienced 'a want of courage and fortitude' when the time came to go through with their vow only featured as a side note, described by Holwell as being willed on by 'gentle force...held by men on each side of the pile until the flames reach [them]'. The description of the pain experienced by these 'self doomed' women was not a call to sympathy, but rather a fixture in the aesthetic power of terror; the 'screams and cries' of these women were contrasted against the demeanour of those women who approached the rite with 'calm, resolution and joyous fortitude'.⁹¹ Holwell's interest was reserved for the second category of women, because he believed 'an instance of the latter' was a 'remarkable proof of female fortitude and constancy'.⁹² The agent in question, the thing that Holwell sought to rationalise and find agreement with, was not the woman undergoing self-immolation, but the consistency of the ideas that secured the custom. In this sense, physical pain was easily eliminated as an important feature in favour of the more 'remarkable' fidelity to certain principles that the event demonstrated.

This elimination of the widow's pain certainly took many stylistic cues from the European hagiographic tradition that serviced a similar idea. As mentioned earlier, Holwell reminded his readers of 'their own history' of 'illustrious examples in both sexes of voluntary sacrifices by fire'.⁹³ Just as in medieval martyrdom, where saints demonstrated an unearthly steadfastness in the face of corporeal suffering, Holwell's described the widow's 'undaunted countenance'.⁹⁴ Her ability to overcome physical pain in pursuit of non-earthly rewards was certainly at the core of Holwell's interpretation of *sati* as an example of women who, believing in the doctrine of metempsychosis, set 'at nought every common attachment which the

⁸⁷ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 3, p. 161.

⁸⁸ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 90.

⁸⁹ See for example Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, 'The Subject of Saṭī: Pain and Death in the Contemporary Discourse on Saṭī', in *Yale Journal of Criticism*, Vol. 3, no. 2 (1990), pp. 1–23.

⁹⁰ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 97.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

weakness of humanity urges, for a longer existence in an evil world'.⁹⁵ This was not an uncommon point of comparison in many accounts of *sati* of the period; prior to Holwell, a popular source of information about India that featured discussion of *sati* was John Henry Grose's *A Voyage to the East-Indies*.⁹⁶ In the second edition (1766), Grose added a footnote to his more negative earlier account, relating the actions of another East India Company official who had tried to intervene in a *sati* ceremony. In this account, although the official offered the widow protection in the Company's factory, she refused, insisting that if she continued 'then she should attain eternal happiness'. The official concluded: 'The ceremony was awfully performed, and she perished in the flames with the constancy of a Christian martyr'.⁹⁷ For Holwell, though, the subtext was slightly different: his dismissal of the woman's suffering resulted from his preoccupation with the structural coherence of the Gentoo religion. Holwell's interest was not with the widow, who served merely as an aesthetic example, but with the idea of an ancient Indian religion.

Conclusion

In his discussion of *sati*, Holwell contrasted British rule with that of the Mughals. He pointed out that although Gentoo women had had to obtain permission from the Mughal government for *sati*, this was a privilege that was 'never withheld from them'.⁹⁸ Holwell therefore presented the Mughal rulers, popularly regarded as oppressive foreign conquerors, as the very picture of reasoned tolerance,⁹⁹ deliberately juxtaposing their actions to the following: 'There have been instances known, when the victim has, *by Europeans*, been forcibly rescued from the pile'.¹⁰⁰ On the one hand Mughal rule, elsewhere described by Holwell as '*Mahometan* tyranny', had consistently and respectfully granted the right to observe the custom of *sati*;¹⁰¹ yet on the other hand, 'enlightened' *Europeans* had been guilty of forcibly interrupting the ancient rite which Holwell, in the preceding paragraphs, had dedicated to vindicating in the minds of his readers.¹⁰² Thus Holwell skilfully set up a paradigm in which Eastern despotism appeared restrained compared to European ignorance.

It is this critical tone that has led many to assume that Holwell's account can be read as possessing a characteristically eighteenth-century style that helpfully juxtaposes a later eighteenth-century style that stands in contrast to eroticised Orientalist rescue narratives. Yet if we re-read Holwell's critique in light of his own motives, we can see him fitting into a far

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁹⁶ John Henry Grose, *A Voyage to the East-Indies, with Observations on Various Parts There* (London: Hooper and Morley, 1757), p. 143.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁹⁸ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 100.

⁹⁹ J.S. Grewal, *Muslim Rule in India: The Assessments of British Historians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

¹⁰⁰ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 100.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰² Holwell was referring to the case of Job Charnock's removal of a *sati* who later became his wife. See Robert Travers, 'Death and the Nabob: Imperialism and Commemoration in Eighteenth-Century India', in *Past & Present*, No. 196 (Aug. 2007), pp. 83–124.

more complex discourse in which the discovery of Eastern religions fed into and informed European religious polemics. Such a misunderstanding points to a broader mistreatment of sources like Holwell, as well as a significant gap in scholarship. There remains a tendency to read such writers as uncomplicated examples of emerging trends. Often lifting extracts from works about India to illustrate a particular point, this lack of contextualisation undermines our understanding of European intellectual culture and its encounters with India at a crucial time in the history of the East India Company's transformation. When Holwell's work is read and understood as a whole, our perspective must shift accordingly. Holwell was not simply extending a sympathetic reading to Indian religion in line with some abstract spirit of the age; rather, he was consciously engaged in constructing and delivering a particular interpretation of this distant and little understood religion in order to make a more general claim for certain idiosyncratic religious convictions. Such a conclusion has several broader implications: it undoes the simplistic association of the eighteenth century with a period of Enlightenment characterised solely by secularisation and modernity; it also questions our understanding of the various, and often personal, contextual factors that can come to bear on cross-cultural encounters. Holwell's interpretation of the Gentoo religion was formed by a complex mixture of contemporary religious polemic, Company politics, literary ambition and individual encounters. This does not mean that we cannot align his ideas with particular discourses; it does mean we should avoid extrapolating writers' ideas out of context to support broad historical trends.

When Holwell wrote about voluntary sacrifice, he was writing in support of the doctrine of metempsychosis, which belonged to a set of Gentoo tenets that he regarded as 'short, pure, simple and uniform'. Holwell's depiction of *sati*'s adherence to 'heroic as well as rational and pious principles' must, therefore, be understood as stemming from the same thesis. It is only when we appreciate this that we can understand his sentiments in the following statement:

[W]e must consider them a race of females trained from their infancy, in the full conviction of their *celestial rank*; and that this world and the corporeal form that encloses them, is destined by God, the one as their place of punishment, the other as their prison.—That their ideas are consequently raised to a soothing degree of dignity befitting of angelic beings.—They are nursed and instructed in the firm faith—that this voluntary sacrifice is the most glorious period of their lives and that thereby the celestial spirit is released from its transmigrations, and evils of a miserable existence, and flies to join the spirit of their departed husband, in a state of purification.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events*, Vol. 2, p. 97–8.